Immigration and National Security: The Extent to Which Central American Migration Impacts Violent Crime in the United States

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Introduction

In October of 2018, a caravan of several thousand people from Honduras crowded wall-to-wall on a bridge spanning the Suchiate River that connects Tecun Uman, Guatemala and Tapachula, Mexico. As chanting migrants pushed through the steel gate, hundreds of Mexican Federal Police attempted to push them back, returning tear gas for thrown rocks in an effort to regain control. Fleeing extreme violence and poor economic conditions in the Northern Triangle of Central America, formed by El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, the migrants left their homes behind for security and opportunity in the United States. While several hundreds gave up the quest and returned on Honduran-sponsored busses and roughly 2,000 people applied for asylum in Mexico, the caravan’s ranks continued to grow and several thousand migrants continued the journey 1,000 miles north to claim asylum in the United States.

President Trump called on Mexico to stop the influx of migrants, sent troops to the U.S.-Mexican border, and threatened to cut aid to the Central American country. Meanwhile, international aid groups offered makeshift housing, basic necessities, and medical attention for the exhausted travelers. Mexican authorities attempted to stop the flow, but several desperate travelers circumvented the official port of entry and crossed the river into Mexico illegally by rowing handmade rafts.

Is the northern migration of thousands of people from a region with one of the highest murder rates per capita in the world an issue of human rights or U.S. national security? Are Central American asylum seekers escaping violence or bringing it with them? Should the American people be sympathetic or terrified? To understand the extent of the potential threat, we must look to previous Central American migrations flows and the impact they have had on American communities.

Background of the Issue

The Recent Central American Migration Surge

Central American northbound migration is not a new phenomenon; however, the dramatic increase in scope and composition since 2011 has caused this migrant population to gain public attention. In 2015 alone, 110,000 people left the Northern Triangle of Central America -- a fivefold increase from 2012.¹ Skyrocketing violence from the region is the root cause of the mass migration, particularly from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These nations are consistently ranked among the world's most violent countries not at war due to their exceptionally high rates of homicide, extortion, gang proliferation, narcotics trafficking, weak rule of law, and official corruption. Many migrants reported fleeing systematic persecution from authorities, pervasive violence from organized criminal organizations, and forced gang recruitment.²

In this paper, I will evaluate the extent to which immigration has had an impact on violent crime in the United States, with a particular focus on the recent surge of migrants from Central America from 2012 to today. Since eighty-five percent of Central American migrants are from the Northern Triangle region, I focus my analysis on immigration from those countries. Although in previous decades Mexican immigration to the United States was on the rise with a peak of 1.6 million apprehensions in 2000, over the last decade and a half it declined to 192,969 in fiscal 2016. Pew Research Center reports a net loss of Mexican immigration to the United States from 2009 to 2014 and a sharp decline in unauthorized Mexican immigrants since 2007.

Meanwhile, Central American immigration has continued to rise. Presently 3.4 million people born in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are living in the United States, more than double the estimated 1.5 million people in 2000, with half of them undocumented. The Center for Immigration Studies reported a 28-fold increase in the number of immigrants from Central America (documented and undocumented) since 1970 — six times faster than the overall immigrant population. El Salvador is the largest sending country from the region, with 1.4 million immigrants in the United States, a 112-fold increase since 1970. Guatemala is second with 815,000, followed by Honduras with 623,000. Approximately half of the Salvadoran and two-thirds of Guatemalan and Honduran immigrants are undocumented.

Between 2008 and the first eight months of 2014, the number of unaccompanied minors jumped from about 8,000 to 52,000, prompting the U.S. Congress to request further research and a hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations. The intense migration continued. In its 2017 annual report, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security reported a 50 percent increase in apprehensions of what it called aliens from the Northern Triangle of Central America by U.S. Border Patrol.

Central American Migration in the Spotlight

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11. The term "immigrants" refers to people residing in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth. This population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent immigrants, refugees and asylees, legal nonimmigrants (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and persons residing in the United States without authorization.
The sharp rise of immigrants fleeing violent crime and extreme poverty in the Northern Triangle has been the focal point of recent significant media and public policy attention. News outlets broadcast asylum-seeking parents being separated from their children in U.S. detention centers in response to the Trump administration’s “Zero-tolerance” policy. Reports of an MS-13 gang member arrested while traveling with a Central American caravan followed President Trump’s tweet: “Getting more dangerous. ‘Caravans’ coming.” The president has repeatedly blamed the murder of two girls in New York on “crippling loopholes in our laws” that have enabled the MS-13 gang, an international criminal organization which originated in Los Angeles and consists of members of Salvadoran origins, “to infiltrate” U.S. communities. The surge of thousands of asylum seekers since 2012, the dramatic increase in unaccompanied children, and the multiple caravans of Central American migrants traveling northward, expose the complex struggle between national security and human rights, especially in the absence of U.S. immigration reforms to regularize the flows of immigrants into the country.

The caravans with Honduran and Salvadoran origins became a flashpoint in the immigration debate during the November 2018 midterm elections. President Trump described the migrants’ northward journey as an “invasion of our country” and his supporters produced a controversial political commercial on the topic featuring footage of a Mexican undocumented immigrant, Luis Bracamontes, bragging about his murder of police officers in 2014, followed by images of Central American asylum seekers and the tagline: “Stop the caravan. Vote Republican.” Although widely rejected by major television and news outlets on both sides of the aisle for being “racist” and misleading, and by Facebook for its “sensational” content, the ad was seen approximately 6.5 million times while featured atop Trump’s Twitter page. Mr. Bracamonte has no known ties to the 2018 caravans and was deported during the respective Democratic and Republican administrations of Clinton and Bush.

While President Trump tweets about dangerous criminals permeating the caravans and news outlets report the infiltration of an MS-13 gang member under the guise of being an unaccompanied minor, humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International, Medecins San Frontieres, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees argue that the United States has a legal obligation under international law to hear asylum claims.

In 2015, one year after the time period dubbed the Central American Migrant Crisis, due to the increased scope and changed composition of Northern Triangle migrants, the United Nations refugee agency conducted a study documenting asylum-seekers through first-hand anecdotal evidence by surveying over 160 women who were traveling alone or with children through Mexico to the United States. The purpose of the study was to draw attention to the complexity of this wave of refugee migration in the Americas and to suggest recommendations on how to deal with the influx. The UN study found the migrants to be vulnerable families fleeing violence, including victims of rape, assault, extortion, and threats by members of heavily-armed, transnational criminal groups.
On the other hand, the anti-immigration group known as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) claims that mass migration is attributable to immigration policies, such as those advocated for by the Obama administration’s “comprehensive immigration reform.” The 2009 comprehensive immigration reform advocated by Obama and a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators called for amnesty for millions of undocumented migrants but failed to win approval. FAIR claims that such proposals “encourage future illegal immigration, inviting increased crime to our country and hindering the safety of Americans.”\(^{19}\) In a brief to Congress on how to address the border crisis, FAIR calls on legislatures to elevate the threshold standard of proof in credible fear interviews and to “impose and enforce penalties for the filing of frivolous, baseless, or fraudulent asylum applications.”\(^{20}\) The Trump administration has made major changes toward this end.

Yet, there are substantive grounds for asylum in many cases. Ample research has been conducted and reported on the push and pull factors of the surge in migration from the Northern Triangle region. Several NGOs and scholars have attempted to debunk the sentiment that migrants leave home due to the pull of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy or strictly for improved economic opportunities.\(^{21}\) U.S. Congressional discussions and scholarly works document coordinated efforts of state and nonstate actors in the Northern Triangle countries, Mexico, and the United States to combat the violent situation and reduce push factors. There is overwhelming evidence that the root cause of this recent wave (2012 to today) is due to first, extreme violence, and second, lack of economic opportunities due to the systematic violence and lawlessness in the region.\(^{22}\)

**A History of Violence in the Northern Triangle**

The Northern Triangle region countries are consistently ranked the most violent countries in the world with the highest murder rates for countries not at war. The perpetual violence can be traced back to the civil wars of El Salvador and Guatemala of the 1980s and the spill over into the neighboring country, Honduras, which left in their wake weak institutions and a large pool of heavily armed, unemployed men. Organized criminal groups proliferated and with them drug trafficking, extortion, corruption, and rampant gang violence. Despite police and judicial reforms, and the accompanying one billion dollars in U.S. aid, 93 percent of crimes go unpunished in some areas and 90 percent of documented cocaine flows pass through this region.\(^{23,24}\)


The most notable criminal organization to come from this region is the Mara Salvatrucha criminal gang (MS-13). The gang was formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadorans who fled civil war in their country. Following large-scale deportations from the United States of undocumented immigrants with criminal records in the early 2000s, the gang’s presence grew in Central America. Coupled with members of the region’s other largest gang, MS-18, there are approximately 85 thousand members in total. According to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, approximately ten thousand MS-13 members inhabit the United States. Due to accusations of human rights abuses by police and military during the region’s civil wars, the inability of law enforcement to contain the violence in the region, and the perpetual poor economic conditions that have resulted, thousands of Central Americans have chosen to leave. The growing conflict in Nicaragua to the south and the possibility of security and opportunity in the United States drives the asylum seekers on their dangerous journey north.

Elite Discourse on Immigration Policy

Public Anxiety Stalls Reform

The way in which migrants are portrayed in public dialogue not only has significant impact on how they are received at the U.S.-Mexican border, but shapes U.S. immigration policy as a whole. Although the United States is a nation of immigrants with a history of openness and a fiercely-held value of “equality for all,” anxiety is rising as the immigrant share of U.S. population has reached a historic high with increasing density in twenty of its metropolitan areas. As rhetoric from high-level politicians and reports from news media make connections between violent crime and immigration, race and ethnicity tensions increase and political parties’ stances on immigration become more divergent -- leading to the inability to agree on comprehensive immigration reform.

The Council on Foreign Relations notes that reform alluded Congress for years due to the controversial nature of the competing security and humanitarian concerns. Congress has debated several plans, comprehensive and piecemeal, over the past two decades but has been unable to come to a consensus; and as a result, some major policy decisions have been moved into the executive and judicial branches of government.

In recent years, the tension at the U.S.-Mexico border due to Central American asylum seekers has reached a fever pitch, polarizing political parties and public perception about how to deal with ever increasing immigration. Although seven percent of Northern Triangle refugees were granted asylum the year after the 2014 surge in migration, compared to 24 percent of refugees from China, the continual flow of Central American migrants to the United States’ southern border elicits anxiety, protests, and much public debate (see Figure 1). This subset of migrants has symbolic implications with the potential to greatly influence immigration policies such as visa allotments and immigrant-selection mechanisms, border controls, immigrant integration programs, and paths to citizenship. The influx of Northern Triangle migrants set the stage for immigration to be a key issue

in the November 2018 midterm elections as Republican and Democrats fought for control of both chambers in Congress.

FIGURE 1: Asylums Granted by Country of Nationality (Affirmatively and Defensively)

Data Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

A Gallup poll revealed that nearly half of U.S. citizens surveyed believe that immigrants are making the crime situation in the United States worse. 29 Highly charged social media posts or news reports have resulted in U.S. public responses that vacillate between outrage over human rights violations, due to images of children sleeping on the floor behind chain-linked fences, and fear of being overrun by potentially dangerous foreigners, after the president sends warnings through twitter of “MS-13 running wild in our communities.” 30 The struggle between human rights and national security is aggravated by anxiety-inducing messaging from elite levels, which slows productive, compromise-driven dialogue that is necessary for immigration reform. Meanwhile, asylum-seekers wait for years to receive a decision on their case, Temporary Protection Status for Hondurans and Salvadorans is terminated, the DACA policy is rescinded, the refugee ceiling is reduced, and the legal pathway to citizenship becomes more restrictive by the year.

Decisions Without Data

Studies have shown how elite discourse shapes mass opinion and action on immigration policy without necessarily tying the rhetoric to empirical data of the actual threat posed by the group. Brader and Suhay find that group cues influence opinion and political action by triggering emotions - in particular anxiety - not by changing beliefs about the severity of the immigration problem. Their findings suggest that the public is susceptible to error and manipulation. 31

Indeed, despite the attempts of scholars to challenge the link between violent crime and immigration with empirical evidence, anti-immigrant rhetoric connecting immigrants to criminal violence continues from the highest level. Sociologists Hagan and Palloni assert that concerns about crime ultimately helped to justify restrictive immigration policies in the past. They also warn that recurring political pressures threaten to bring the simpler, more sweeping stereotype - that immigration causes crime - back into prominence.32

Immigration scholars Massey and Pren assert that “openness and restrictiveness in immigration policy are more strongly influenced by domestic economic circumstances and political ideologies than statistical evidence of what is governing international migration.”33 The objective of this paper is to confront this trend by bringing current and statistical-based evidence to inform the debate of whether or not higher concentrations of Central American immigrants lead to increased crime rates in the United States.

The Immigration and Crime Relationship

Does Immigration Cause Crime?

The relationship between immigration and crime in the United States has been studied at length by scholars whose findings convey a similar conclusion: that immigration does not increase crime and violence, in fact, in the first generation it seems to reduce it. This work attempts to upend the common perception among criminologists, sociologists, policymakers, and the general public that these groups have a propensity to settle in poor neighborhoods and commit crimes, often called the “social disorganization” theory. A trend that emerged, however, is that second and third generation immigrants do show an increase in incarceration rates beyond that of their parents and grandparents, although not to the extent of native-born citizens.34 There are studies of potential causal factors, the correlation to immigrant concentration (or lack of), and how to address this phenomenon; however, that is beyond the scope of this paper.

One such study was conducted by Robert J. Sampson, a Harvard scholar who studies the immigration-crime link, to assess the potential dangers of immigration by drawing comparisons between the increased level of immigration and the crime rate in the United States. Data from this study demonstrates a reduction in homicides as immigration increased during the time period of 1990 and 2004. He contrasts the 2007 controversial U.S. public debate by several prominent figures who connected immigrants to crime with what he calls the “fact-based scenario” of immigrants reducing crime in disadvantaged neighborhoods.35
Rumbaut and Ewing reported similar findings, citing that between 1994 and 2005 U.S. crime rates declined as immigration increased. Even as the undocumented population doubled to 12 million during that time period, the violent crime rate in the United States declined 34.2 percent. In addition, cities with large immigrant populations such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Miami also experienced declining crime rates during that period. Sampson concludes that correlation does not equal causation; but these figures do suggest that the trends are opposite of what is commonly assumed.

One of the most comprehensive and recent studies on this topic compiled data from 1980 to 2016. In this study, the Marshall Project collaborated with a decades long, large-scale collaborative study between four universities and led by Robert Abelman from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Researchers compared immigration rates with crime rates over several decades in 200 metro areas, which are a mixture of urban hubs and smaller manufacturing centers, geographically dispersed across the country.

The data from the study shows immigration growing for decades and crime trending in the opposite direction to a level below what it was in 1980. In 136 of the 200 metro areas, (almost 70 percent), the immigrant population rose while crime stayed the same or decreased. In 27 percent of the areas (54 metro areas), both immigration and crime increased. The ten places with the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980. The study claimed there is no causal relationship between the rise of immigration and violent crime of the 54 areas that increased in crime rates. The Marshall Project came to the conclusion that the data suggests that either immigration has a reducing effect on violent crime or it has no relationship between the two variables. It is important to note, however, that the study did not include Los Angeles, the city in the United States with the highest concentration of Central Americans and the birthplace of the criminal gang with El Salvadoran origins, MS-13. This paper looks more closely at this key metro area in the analysis section.

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Data source: Migration Policy Institute, FBI Uniform Crime Report

Counter-arguments

Even with the publication of statistics through scholarly journals, the argument that immigration leads to more crime in American neighborhoods is still prominent in public discourse and has driven immigration policy decisions and proposals by the Trump administration.

The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), an anti-immigration thinktank, takes issue with the findings of such studies, pointing out that the lack of correlation between the immigrant share of population and levels of crime is only addressing the overall crime rate, not crimes specifically committed by immigrants. As contradictory evidence, the CIS refers to a 2009 analysis by the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Immigration Statistics which found that crime rates were higher in metropolitan areas that received large numbers of legal immigrants; however, no link to data sets was provided.\(^\text{40}\)

FAIR continues to draw a link between immigrants and criminality, claiming that a reduction of overall immigration to what it calls “a more normal level” would lessen the negative impact of immigration on national security. FAIR gives anecdotal evidence of the threat of what it calls “uncontrolled immigration” through a series of 18 examples of serious crimes committed on U.S. citizens by immigrants in 2017. One such example was the killing of a woman by an undocumented immigrant from Honduras who was street racing. FAIR addresses its lack of official metrics to measure its claim, stating that these cases are not representative of the illegal alien population in general, but “demonstrate that better prevention of illegal immigration is a public safety issue.”\(^\text{41}\) As evidence, FAIR highlights the failed effort by an immigrant to detonate a massive car bomb in New York City’s Times Square in May of 2018, claiming that it demonstrates that a determined terrorist can exploit weaknesses in the system.\(^\text{42}\)


President Trump’s claim that dangerous people are traveling with the caravan is backed to some extent by the Center for Immigration Studies, which claims that within the caravan or not, Special Interest Aliens from Middle Eastern regions and countries are entering the United States illegally through Latin America. The DHS asserts that these groups pose a “higher risk of committing terrorist acts because of the presence of Islamist terrorist organizations.”\footnote{Bensman, Todd. 2018. “Political Crossfire over the Migrant Caravan Produces New Information on a Real Homeland Security Problem.” \textit{Center for Immigration Studies}, October 23, 2018. https://cis.org/Bensman/Political-Crossfire-over-Migrant-Caravan-Produces-New-Information-Real-Homeland-Security.} Special Interest Aliens (SIAs) are said to utilize well-established Latin American smuggling routes from countries of the Middle East, and also from South Asia and North Africa, according to a memo released by President Obama’s Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson, in 2016. There was enough of a potential threat to form a SIA Joint Action Group to dismantle groups that specialize in human smuggling into the Western Hemisphere.\footnote{Johnson, Jeh. 2016. Memorandum. Department of Homeland Security. https://cis.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Jeh-Johnson-Cross-Border-Movement-of-Special-Interest-Alie...%20%284%29.pdf.} To what extent SIAs have infiltrated Central American caravans or used their same route is challenging to verify as the documentation of this group’s actions is often classified and found only in the DHS’s sensitive compartmented information facilities, or SCIFs, according to the Center for Immigration Studies.\footnote{Bensman, Todd. 2018. “Political Crossfire over the Migrant Caravan Produces New Information on a Real Homeland Security Problem.” \textit{Center for Immigration Studies}, October 23, 2018. https://cis.org/Bensman/Political-Crossfire-over-Migrant-Caravan-Produces-New-Information-Real-Homeland-Security.}

**Research Question & Methodology: Evaluating the Impact of NTCA Migration on U.S. Crime Trends**

This paper seeks to understand the extent to which northbound Central American immigration has an impact on violent crime in the United States. Specifically, I test the relationship between immigration and crime through the use of qualitative information and quantitative statistics with the goal to aggregate current data pertaining to this subgroup to facilitate an evidence-based discussion on the topic.

To better analyze this question and inform the specific dialogue of today, this evaluation narrows the focus to the immigration and violent crime trends of Northern Triangle immigrants in the United States. Previous scholars compiled all Latinos together in their collection and analysis of statistics with a particular focus on Mexican immigrants. Since these studies, Northern Triangle migrants have increased substantially while Mexican immigration has sharply declined. This research examines the effect that this subgroup of migrants has had on security in American neighborhoods today.

I begin my analysis by comparing the overall immigration share of population in the United States and U.S. violent crime rates of 326 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) to determine if increased immigration in the United States has led to an overall increase in violent crime. To evaluate the current situation, I gathered the most current statistics available from the Migration Policy Institute, which indicated the total U.S. population, the total number of immigrants, and the immigrant share of U.S. population in 2017.\footnote{“U.S. Immigrant Population by Metropolitan Area.” 2012. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-metropolitan-area.} I collected violent crime statistics for the same year.
and an identical MSA set from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report 2017, honing in on violent crime rates as defined in the report as murder, rape, assault, and robbery.

To get a better understanding of the scope of the Central American immigrant population in the United States since the 2014 Central American migrant crisis, I used the data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey on the place of birth for the foreign-born population in the United States to assess the growth of the Central American immigrant population in the United States year-by-year and how it compares to the overall U.S. population and the total foreign-born U.S. population. I paid particular attention to the years 2005 to 2017 to understand before and after the 2014 surge of migrants. The Department of Homeland Security’s Yearbook of Immigration Statistics provides a compendium of tables that provide data on foreign nationals who are granted permanent residence and their country of last residence. I chose to include statistics from fiscal years 1970 to 2010 and 2013 to 2017 to determine the magnitude of this new wave of migrants compared to past decades. Looking at the data throughout the decades helps to gain perspective, as significant Central American northern migration began in the 1980s with the region’s civil wars and spiked in 2014 with an especially high rate of Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC), the official term for unaccompanied, undocumented migrants under the age of 18.

Next, I evaluate whether this subset of the immigrant population poses a threat to national security, paying particular attention to the scope of the migrant group’s connection to the ruthless gang, MS-13. After assessing where the highest concentrations of Central American migrants have settled, I analyze the change in Northern Triangle immigration and Crime Rates from 2005 to 2017 to see what trends emerge. Due to the gravity of the crime, homicides are more likely to be reported even in immigrant communities which typically have lower reporting rates. I compare findings of the net change of violent crime rates and immigration with those of homicide rates and immigration for the time period to see if a stronger correlation presents itself.

Through the compilation of statistics from the Center for Immigration Studies and the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol for the time period of 2012 to 2017, I evaluate the reach of the Mara Salvatrucha criminal organization and to what extent it is representative of the overall Central American immigrant population. I examine the claims of high profile U.S. leaders who assert that MS-13 gang members are arriving with the recent surge of Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) and that they are “running wild” in American neighborhoods. Using current data, I assess the extent of the threat of this gang with El Salvadoran origins.

This paper adds value to previous work done on this issue by compiling and analyzing data of immigration of the Northern Triangle countries of Central America separate from Mexico. By comparing the previous flows and outcomes with the current Northern Triangle migration and U.S. violent crime statistics, we can better understand if the violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras has translated into increased violence in the communities in which they have settled.

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Analysis

Findings in Immigration Trends

Since 1970, the share and number of immigrants in the United States has increased rapidly. The immigrant share of the population is nearing a historic high, but it is still lower than prior to the Great Depression and World War II.

The data retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau demonstrates a steady climb of immigrants from the Northern Triangle region that have settled in the United States. In 2005, immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras living in the United States equaled nearly 2 million and increased to slightly above 3 million over the next 12 years. In the time period between 2011 and 2017, a time which spans before and after the migrant crisis, the number of Northern Triangle immigrants rose approximately 400,000 which indicated a growth of 0.1 percent of the foreign-born population (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Northern Triangle Population in the United States

To put the increases in immigrant population in perspective and understand the scope of Central American migration, it is important to note that in 2017 the overall U.S. population consisted of over 326 million people, of which approximately 45 million were foreign-born. Of the foreign-born, the Northern Triangle subset of immigrants constitute 0.9% of the share of overall
population, of which by far the largest percentage is attributed to those with El Salvadoran origins.\textsuperscript{50} Chinese foreign-born are the most prevalent with 4.3 percent of the share, which consists of Eastern, South Central, and South Eastern Asian immigrants. Those born in Mexico are second with 3.4 percent; while European and African foreign-born make up 1.2 and 0.7 percent respectively (see Figure 4).\textsuperscript{51}

FIGURE 4: Foreign-born Populations in the U.S., 2017

![Pie chart showing foreign-born populations in the U.S., 2017. The largest share is U.S.-born at 86.3%, followed by Mexico at 3.4%, Asia at 4.3%, Other Foreign-born at 3.1%, and a small share for each of the other regions.]

Data Source: US Census

Northern Triangle Immigrants and Crime

The findings of my research contradict the common perception that the concentration of Central American immigrants drives up crime rates, in fact, the results show a pattern that upends popular stereotypes and pokes holes in the immigrant-crime connection. In 2017, the overall rate of violent crimes per 100,000 inhabitants in the United States fell 0.9 percent when compared to the previous year. That percentage is 16.5 percent lower than the estimated rate of 2008, previous the Central American migrant crisis.

Upon initial observation of the Central American connection to crime, no patterns emerged between the most violent metro areas in the United States and the areas with the highest concentration of Northern Triangle migrants. In fact, not one of the 27 metros with high concentration of immigrants from that region is within the top ten of the most violent metros in the United States. According to U.S. Census data, the metro area with the highest concentration of


foreign-born from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras is Los Angeles, California. With a rate of 497, it is ranked 78 out of the 326 metro areas on the FBI’s 2017 Uniform Crime Report for violent crime rates. While this rate is above the U.S. average of 388, it is nowhere near the rate of the most violent communities in the United States, such as Kansas City, Missouri, which holds the highest ranking at a rate of 1718. With the spotlight on the San-Diego-Tijuana border as the caravan participants arrive by the thousands, it is interesting to note that as San Diego and its surrounding areas experienced an increase of Northern Triangle immigration by 16 percent, it reported a violent crime and homicide rate decrease of 28 percent and 27 percent respectively.

In evaluating the changes between Northern Triangle foreign-born immigrants and changes of violent crime and homicide rates in the metro areas in which they settled between the years of 2005 and 2017, no significant trends emerge. That is, upon analysis of the linear relationship between the two variables of immigration and violent crime, no clear correlation emerged. In fact, crime went down across the board, as indicated by the correlation coefficient of 0.033 and as depicted in the figure below (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Northern Triangle Immigration and Violent Crime, 2005-2017

![Northern Triangle Immigration and Violent Crime](image)

One consideration that could affect the results is that immigrants (especially undocumented immigrants) are less likely to report crimes. The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) points out the potential for a share of these underreported crime to have been committed by undocumented immigrants. To address this concern, I gathered homicide rates for the 27 metro areas to see if a different pattern or level of correlation occurred. Due to the seriousness of the offense, studies have

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shown that these crimes have a higher likelihood of being reported regardless of the associated risks.

When comparing NTCA immigration and homicide rates, the weak correlation is even more evident. In the vast majority of cases, homicide rates declined as immigration climbed significantly. With the influx of Central American foreigners ranging from 4 percent to 407 percent increases, only five metro areas showed a rise in homicide rates, and one community showed no change at all. Los Angeles, the metro most representative of Central American immigrants, reported a growth of 4 percent of foreigners from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras and a 45 percent decrease of homicides.

Seattle metro area had the highest spike in immigration, rising by 407 percent, whereas homicides dropped by three percent. The only metro area to experience a reduction in Northern Triangle concentration was Columbus, Ohio, which also experienced a 20 percent rise in homicide rates. The next most significant jump in immigration was Baltimore, which experienced immigration growth by 179 percent and, opposite of the majority of cases, an increase of homicides by 16 percent. The increase could be attributed to the riots that ensued after the death of Freddie Gray who died April 19, 2015 while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department. The homicide rate spiked in 2015 from 9.6 to 13.1 and continues to increase as tensions continue. Beyond these observations, the figure below demonstrates this weak correlation between Central American immigration and homicides (see Figure 6). These results are statistically significant as evidenced by the P-Value of .001, a strong indicator that these results did not occur by mere chance.

FIGURE 6: Northern Triangle Immigration and Homicides, 2005-2017

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Data Source: US. Census, FBI Uniform Crime Report

A Closer Look at the MS-13 Threat

MS-13: Public Enemy Number One?

The threat of MS-13 infiltrating American communities has received high level attention in social and news media. The most prominent figure of U.S. politics, President Donald Trump, has shined a spotlight on the notoriously brutal gang based in El Salvador through his use of social media and speeches. His commentary repeatedly connects U.S. immigrants and immigration policy with the international crime gang. For example, in his January 2018 State of the Union address, President Trump linked the arrival of Central American unaccompanied minors to the 2016 Long Island murders by members of the MS-13 gang and blamed loopholes in U.S. immigration law. In a tweet in April 2018, Trump revived the argument that the U.S. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy was to blame for the caravan of migrants heading from Central America to the U.S.-Mexican border. In another tweet, he contended that “Honduras, Mexico [and others]...send many of their people to our country through our weak immigration policies,” then connected “open borders” to “drugs and crime.” With the families of two girls murdered by MS-13 present, Trump opened a roundtable on immigration by conflating the gang to all immigrants by asserting, “We’re here today to discuss the menace of MS-13. It’s a menace, a ruthless gang that has violated our borders and transformed once-peaceful neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields.”

To what extent is the MS-13 criminal gang representative of the overall immigrant population? Philip Bump takes issue with what he calls Trump’s “narrow spotlight” on MS-13 in a Washington Post article. He condemns his conflating of the gang to all immigrants and his focus on a “subset of a subset of the immigrant population.”

PolitiFact, a fact-checking website, attempted to determine if the gang members who killed the Long Island teenagers had in fact been given entrance to the United States as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) by inquiring with the U.S. Justice Department, Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. No agency provided information to support his claim. Furthermore, experts have shown that MS-13’s growth predates the last two administrations’ immigration policies as the gang was formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by marginalized Salvadoran youth who fled civil war in their country.

The Narrow Scope of the MS-13 Problem

Since the early 2000s, the size of the criminal organization grew following the large-scale deportations to Central America from the United States of undocumented immigrants with criminal records. However, the scope of MS-13’s influence is still quite modest. Coupled with members of

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the Northern Triangle region’s other largest gang, MS-18, there are approximately 85 thousand members in total. According to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), approximately ten thousand MS-13 members inhabit the United States, merely 0.3 percent of the overall U.S. population. According to a report in 2011 by the FBI, there are 1.4 million gang members that make up more than 33,000 gangs, which makes MS-13’s scope pale in comparison.

With respect to the claim that hoards of MS-13 members are crossing the border as unaccompanied minors, of the 45,400 UACs apprehended at the border in the five-year period of 2012 and 2017, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) apprehended 159 UACs with confirmed or suspected gang affiliations, 56 of which were suspected or confirmed to be affiliated with MS-13. Newsweek reported that 90 percent of the 60 migrants in the April 2018 caravan apprehended in Arizona were families, a third were less than 18 years of age and only one gang member was found among them.

What is the reach of MS-13 criminality?

To assess the threat to public safety, we must understand the reach of the MS-13 criminal organization, known for its brutality and subcultural moral code based on merciless retribution. To do so, I use data compiled by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) through a study of MS-13 criminal charges and arrests of 2012 to 2017. CIS gathered this information from U.S. federal institutions such as the Department of Justice (DOJ), FBI, Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the local agencies in which the offenses occurred.

The study gathered a total of 500 cases which occurred in 22 states between the five-year period. Data indicates that 93 percent of the crimes occurred in ten highly populated states. The states affected are not geographically isolated, as they from East to West and show no correlation to a specific region. Some may argue the far-reaching ability of this gang; however, MS-13 crimes are small in number compared to the 1.2 million overall violent offenses committed. At its most violent in 2016, the gang committed 163 offenses nationwide, and the average yearly number of offenses in the most incident-concentrated state, California, is 17. Of the 500 cases, 345 were related to violence with a high concentration on murder, sex trafficking, drug trafficking and extortion. When compared to the overall violent crime statistics which indicate that assault accounts for 65 percent of overall U.S. violent crimes, the violent nature of this group could be one reason why they are receiving disproportionate public attention.

CIS claims that MS-13 crime in the United States has rebounded, however, when the data is examined closely, it becomes apparent that the incidents were a relatively small number when compared to the overall numbers of offenses and total U.S. criminal gang population. With regards to MS-13 gang members arriving in the United States as unaccompanied minors, the study found that 120 of the 506 MS-13 suspects in the case set arrived as UACs, including 48 of the murder suspects. The Cato Institute puts these numbers in perspective as it reports that 0.1 percent of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol arrests were MS-13 gang members at the border mid-year in

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2018—that’s just 0.11 percent of the 252,187 apprehensions in this year. That number is similar to the statistics from prior years and does not suggest a resurgence as the CIS study claims. Furthermore, apprehensions of individuals in any gang made up just 0.2 percent of all Border Patrol arrests in 2018, meaning that 99.8 percent of all arrests were not gang members. Empirical data reveals that the scope of MS-13 danger is much smaller than indicated by the amount of discussion it receives in the public spotlight and that the threat is not rebounding to a significant level. The pockets of terror of this criminal gang that elicits fear in the hearts of Americans has the potential to disrupt neighborhoods, but not the United States as a whole. The violence of this subgroup of a subgroup should be addressed at a local level and separated from the immigration dialogue.

Policy Recommendations

To address the surge in Central American migration, to reduce the burden on host countries, and to facilitate balanced immigration dialogue, there are several things we can do. Rather than try to change the mind of President Trump, it may be more impactful to target the hearts and minds of the American people through campaigns to show the human side of the Northern Triangle immigrants. When so much of the public discourse is centered around the threat of their arrival and connections to violent crime, engaging media, community, and non-governmental organizations in an effort to humanize the migrants and inform the American public of the extent of the threat. Scholars have done extensive research and found that immigration and criminality are not linked in the first generation, but they struggle to share their message on platforms that reach the majority of citizens. Infographics, social media, and ad campaigns are just a few of the tools that can be used to undo the de-humanizing of the public rhetoric surrounding those fleeing violence in their home countries. Not perceiving the Central Americans who are granted asylum as hostile or threats will aid them in assimilating into their new communities as productive, engaged citizens.

Second, the United States should offer sustained and increasing support to sending communities to reduce the push factors that are driving flows of migration northward. To echo Christina Perkins in her paper, “Achieving Growth and Security in the Northern Triangle,” supporting the Northern Triangle must be a priority. We need to increase our support of the Alliance for Prosperity plan - a comprehensive strategy to counter the underlying causes of violence, economic stagnation, and weak governance. U.S. funding can be better spent making sure they never leave home. In FY2016, Congress allocated $750 million to Central America, a 34 percent increase from $506 million in FY2015 – just a fraction of the $49 billion it spent on foreign assistance that year. The aid is conditional upon the governments adopting policies that discourage migration to the United States and assist in reintegration of deportees, and accountability, anti-corruption, and tax and business reforms. In addition, helping the transit or host countries through funding and supporting rule of law, education, and industry-growing initiatives could provide an alternative to the United States when migrants are in search of a safe have. Keeping migrants closer to home increases the likelihood that they will return after conflict is resolved.

Additionally, development-based, as opposed to resettlement-based refugee policy, is an idea that is gaining traction. The idea is promoted by Collier and Botts from Oxford University and even

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endorsed by the Center for Immigration Studies as an alternative to how we have been addressing refugee concerns for 50 years.⁶² The overarching principle is to transform refugees from a burden to a benefit for the host country. By setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZs), countries are incentivized to onboard refugees by receiving funding for infrastructure and industry-growing projects from the international community. Those countries in turn incentivize locals to invest in businesses and hire new arrivals through tax exemptions, labor scholarships, and other devices used to elicit foreign investment. Instead of using a portion of its national budget to fulfil its humanitarian duty, the country is able to capitalize on low-cost labor and financing of jumbo projects that will in turn result in industrial development advancement. The hope is that refugees will stay close to home and return to rebuild their country after the conflict with their newly acquired skills and economic freedom⁶³

**Conclusion**

There are several challenges to measuring immigration and criminality, some of which I attempted to remedy and others which call for further research. In order to assess the immigrant-crime relationship, the data that was most available for measuring was collected by Metropolitan Statistical Areas. One benefit of this unit is that it avoids selection bias as it includes 326 metro areas that are spread out nationwide and control for population of over 100,000 people - a useful sample size since crime rates are reported per 100,000 inhabitants. The downside, however, is that these metro areas include surrounding counties with lower crime rates than their larger city centers. One example of how this can skew results is in the case of Detroit where the crime rate of the city center is 1030 and the Metropolitan Statistical Area is 554. When ranking and comparing the most violent cities and then comparing it to immigration changes, highly affected cities may not be considered due to the extremely low crime rates of their surrounding counties. In addition, some high crime areas have a population of 100,000 and were left out of the analysis.

Compiling an accurate headcount of immigrant populations in the United States is complicated by undocumented immigrants’ hesitation to fill out citizenship and last country of residence questions on U.S. Census surveys for fear of being deported. However, community funding of education and social programs often depend on the survey reporting which encourages participation. Also, there is potential for violent crimes of MS-13 members to be underreported due to their use of extortion and other violent measures to influence their victims. To minimize this, I used homicides for my analysis since there is a higher likelihood of this grievous offense to be reported regardless of the risks. Moreover, there is a need for more accurate and complete data of the number of MS-13 gang members who enter the United States as Unaccompanied Alien Minors to properly evaluate to what extent they are using the caravans to infiltrate the United States.

Overall, although Northern Triangle immigration has surged over the past several years, the evidence does not support the claim that they are posing a U.S. national security threat. Not only did overall U.S. violent crime rates descend as Central American migration share rose; but the influx of these foreigners in 27 metro areas showed no correlation when compared to the violent crime rate changes of each one during 2012 to 2017. When compared to homicide rate changes, there is no

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correlation between the changes in the immigrant population from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras; in fact, the vast majority of cases demonstrate a reduction in crime. The violence that Northern Triangle migrants are fleeing is not translating into more violence in American communities, as the public discourse seems to suggest. The Central American migration threat has been hyperinflated in scope and potential for insecurity. Likewise, the threat of the MS-13 gang is far smaller in scope and reach than high-profile dialogue suggests and is given disproportionate attention in the public discourse considering the levels of crime. Although spread throughout cities in the United States, the members and the offenses of this murderous gang are few in number and show no signs of expansion.

The conflating of all immigrants with this small-scale gang, as has been done repeatedly through President Trump’s tweets and speeches, is unfounded and problematic. Connecting all immigrants with the violent acts of the few stalls progress on immigration reform, influences public opinion and immigration policy decisions without data to support the level of threat, creates an atmosphere of conflict surrounding those requesting asylum and settling in American neighborhoods, and is counterproductive to keeping Americans safe.

The recent northern migration of Central Americans by the thousands is both a humanitarian and a national security issue. Solutions will need to be more comprehensive and nuanced than the simple taglines suggest of “refugees go home” and “welcome asylum seekers.”

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